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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## SUCCESS IN SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

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This is an attempt to present to ourselves and other high-school teachers suggestions for increasing our efficiency. It accepts the proposition that so long as a teacher is alive a teacher may improve. It avoids expressing any of the innumerable explanations and defenses of things as they are, for its purpose is to feature workable means of bringing things to what they ought to be. It claims no discoveries, no originality; it is a summary of common ideas.

"Retardation," "elimination," "high-school mortality" are prominent terms in the educational journals just now. They are negative ideas. We want positive suggestions. We are more interested in health than in disease. We propose a monograph on success in school.

### I. WHAT WE ARE FOR

The community sends its children to us expecting them to be educated. It raises money and pays it to us in order that the city may be uplifted. The parents who support us do not subscribe to the theory that a high school is an institution for preserving

<sup>1</sup>This statement of high-school policy is an abstract of eight papers presented in a series of "efficiency conferences" conducted by heads of departments in the Washington Irving High School for Girls, February to May, 1911.

a course of study, or maintaining a system of usages, or keeping up a high standard, or training some youngsters to be leaders, or for supporting us. The people who are supporting us care little for these things. They do care for children. They pay for having the young people trained, not for maintaining a given grade of education. They send us bright, stupid, industrious, lazy, well-behaved, impudent children, not with the idea that we shall teach those that are able and willing to work, not for a decision that such a child is not fit for high school, but for having each child improved. This is not chiefly a place for those who can succeed without help. Such need us less than the others do. A public high school differs from an elementary school chiefly in the age of its children. We are not elected, we are not paid, to train leaders. There is nothing in the American system of nationality to warrant this assumption. Our country was formed in repudiation of the old idea of leaders and followers. The Fathers of America established "universal education." This means that everyone, rich or poor, is entitled to our services. A child may be poor in brains, in effort, in appreciation, in gratitude, in respect, in all which we may have been taught to regard as high-school necessities. Such a one belongs here. Our inherited high-school theory may not accord with this. If so, the theory must disappear. Scholarship is not our chief business. Training the children we receive and securing more children to train is our business. The grade of scholarship which best trains our membership is the grade we want. This is not a fixed standard. It is one thing in 1910, another in 1911. The chairmen of departments will keep it high enough; we need not worry about that.

High school is not a privilege. It is the right of all. All the parents are paying for it. Every child of fourteen and upward needs it. An unschooled man or woman, who has failed to get the best training possible up to eighteen years of age, is a disgrace to the promises of universal education, a disgrace to us high-school defenders. Children not in high school should be brought into it. Those here should be retained and benefited. A fair return for money paid does not consist in reports from us

that a child is lazy, unprepared, or unfit to go on. We are experts devoted to the occupation of making such children industrious, prepared, and fit to advance.

We came into this school from many localities. Some of us studied much algebra; some, German; others, Latin. We never studied New York children. We must study them, their previous schooling, their home surroundings, their mental characteristics, for the purpose of making our algebra, German, or Latin of benefit to them. We are to break away from the traditional type of a study-centered high school. We are a person-centered high school. The person is the one we are teaching. We are responsible for the success of the student. That is chiefly what we are put here for.

Our retention as teachers and our advancement are to be conditioned upon tests of our successes as educators, not upon our scholarship, which is merely our equipment. It is what we do, not what we seem prepared to do, that is to count. Anyone who has a book can give out and hear lessons. What we need is to exercise such personal influence as will result in awakening the self-propelled energies of our young folks to daily success. We need to know and to use the forces by which mankind is awakened: encouragement, inspiration, suggestion, belief, exhortation, compliment, recognition, and praise. The negative corrective forces have been used too much. Teaching originated in love. It is an expansive force requiring optimism and hope. Teaching-time is so short that the information which instruction gives is relatively small. Unless it starts desires it is a failure. If it insists upon success day by day it will create in each student an expectation of success. Teachers must not let the majority of classes grow familiar with failure. Failures must be minimized, successes increased.

## II. PARALYZED BY A MARKING SYSTEM

One stumbling-block in the way of the high-school teacher's rendition of service worth her pay is often a system of marking. In our faculty are one hundred and forty-eight teachers from a hundred and forty different previous schools. These teachers

bring with them different traditions of marking. One of the most confusing notions is that a mark should be a percentage. For instance, let perfection be 100, then it is assumed a teacher can estimate what fraction of perfection each pupil is. This is nonsense. It assumes the possibility of mathematical exactness in the estimate of living personalities. No one but a teacher who had substituted system for brains would think of doing this. If a teacher wants to do this in the case of pupils, she should demand the same treatment for herself. Let her maximum of salary be considered as 100 per cent. Each month let her be marked by percentages and paid that fraction indicated by her rating. If the system of percentages fails to apply with teachers, why try to make it a substitute for intelligence in the treatment of students? Whatever be the usage in other high schools, there is no sanction in the New York school system for enslaving a teacher's judgment by a percentage scale. Not since 1902 has there been any encouragement of it in the by-laws:

The rating shall in every case be based solely upon the pupil's ability to go on. . . . The ratings shall be satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Satisfactory is either excellent, A, or good, B.

That is the fundamental basis of the New York City rating system. Our use of figures is merely a shorthand expression of the same idea. Satisfactory is 60, 61, 91, 90, etc. Unsatisfactory is 59, 48, 10, etc. But 60 on a scholarship card does not mean 60 per cent of anything, nor is it the result of averaging any daily, monthly, or examination marks. The teacher's judgment of the pupil's ability to advance has not in New York City since 1902 ever been restricted to mechanical or numerical calculations. We may keep all the records we need day by day, but, as Superintendent Stevens says, we must promote on what a pupil can do, not on what she has done.

Marks cannot be used for rewards or punishments. We sometimes think that we are constituted administrators of justice, and that it is wrong to reward laziness by promotion. Promotion is not reward. There is no official justification for this view. Promotion is placing a student in the highest grade in which she can do the work. No one can review the directions

of all our superintendents without observing the continued emphasis upon the necessity of divorcing reward and punishment from the grading of children. The normal condition of progress would be to have all the children of the same age in the same class, never taking two years to do one year's work. We gain nothing by crying at once, "That is impossible." We do gain by setting that as an ideal to offset the chilling indifference which has wasted so many days of children's time and so many dollars of parents' money by letting so many students repeat so many terms. A farmer's success is reckoned by the number of bushels of wheat to the acre; a foundry's value, by the amount of unspoiled castings. We want to be rated on the number of children we educate in the powers pertinent to our specialties. The ratings we give determine their advancement. The examinations given by others are to determine the kind of teaching we have done.

### III. THE HIGH-SCHOOL MATERIAL

The material of our school is young persons from thirteen to eighteen years old. They often come to the school bewildered. The business of the teacher is to help the student find herself, to get the working powers obedient to the will. Many do not wake up at all during the first year. Some are merely sent to school; they do not come of their own accord. But behind it all is expectation of success. We are not to disappoint it. Each day, each girl must advance. If our treatment of our subject fails to engage any pupil, we ourselves fail. We cannot lay it to machinery, reports, and ratings. Every girl's failure to advance is a failure of her teacher. It does not help matters much to lay the failure to causes outside of the teacher's power. The fact that the teacher's power was not strong enough to offset those causes is a thing for correction, not for justification. The beginning of our term is the critical time. The teacher has to attract the pupil. Of all things in the world a high-school teacher must be engaging. There must be some reorganization of high schools by which the teacher will be rewarded for keeping the beginners in school and punished for letting them leave. If the departmental system prevents responsibility for children and

demands responsibility for subjects, then let us have done with the departmental system and get an organization that will determine what teachers succeed in keeping children in school and what teachers without concern let children leave.

The mill process is a failure with high-school children. Girls will come to school if they are happy there. It is not too much to require algebra teachers to search for and use the happiness that lies in algebra. We have a great variety of choices from which our patrons can select studies. But no vocational or other subject has divine inspiration enough to delight a young person. The teacher is the agent for that purpose. The educated person is one better prepared for a happy life. The children we fail to attract will go on living in our community. Each one lost to us is a reduction of the progress of our people.

No high-school teacher is so simple as to confuse happiness with laziness. Adapting the high-school course to the capacity of all the students does not mean abandonment of work. It means more skilful direction of work. It means the ability to show the worker that she is succeeding—not in getting marks, but in getting power. Teachers look at the negative side too much. If we tell the poorest one in the class that she is better than when she entered it, and will be better tomorrow, we furnish one of the most effective suggestive forces for luring her to work to be better tomorrow. Success is a positive force. Hope of it draws ahead. Reprimand, overdone, defeats its own purpose. "There is so much good in this paper that it is worth writing over," gets a sloppy piece of work done with more profit to the writer than a dozen condemnations of careless mistakes. We know that. But we ignore it, and fall back upon a stupid tradition of teachers that we are "correctors of youth." We are not that. We are educators—drawers out of powers. We are not employed to encourage slovenly work. Neither are we hired to condemn it. It is our business to get everybody to work better than now.

Foolish aloofness keeps us from knowing our material. If we forbid our children to speak, we shall never know them. The teacher who has a group around her before and after class works

so much more easily that the time some might think wasted more than pays for itself. This is the kind of conversation we hear: "I used to tell the time by the cattle trains on that railroad. I know a girl who never saw a cow. I'm glad Roosevelt's getting it in the neck. He even tried to rule Egypt. I think it was mean of them to bring the obelisk from Egypt to Central Park: it looks so lonely there. I love the 'Idylls of the King.' I read them through the first day we got the book. My grandmother saw a Banshee before she died. I think Burke's speech on conciliation is fierce." A girl who talks like that, says the traditional teacher, has no place in the high school. A girl who talks like that, say we, needs the high school and us.

If we are to serve New York girls we need to know more about them than we do. We are too well satisfied with the imported ideas that we have brought here from Lewiston and Elmira. The main reason schools stand still is because we resent being treated as in need of reform. A course of study with a teacher cutting off and handing out pieces of it every day is the idea some of us have of a high school. It is not to be wondered at. That sort of thing has been accepted and paid for. Now the authorities are waking up and saying, "What you are to do is to pass out this nutriment in suitable quantities, suitably prepared, to see that your family eats it in that happy state suitable for digestion, and that they gain strength and health and beauty thereby. You begin with a table full, we insist that you do not end the dinner with any vacant chairs."

#### IV. ADAPTING OURSELVES

This making the studies fit the children instead of continuing the old tradition of course-of-study for those who stand it never fails in a meeting of teachers to raise a dust-cloud of objections. A teacher can think of so many reasons why the children of the community cannot be educated that in some faculties the entire meeting-time is devoted to showing that no change of the old methods should be thought of. This is the tendency that caused John Gorst to remark that if the American children are to be educated the system of teaching must be changed not only upon



the demands of persons outside of the schools but in the face of the worst opponents of education there are: namely, the teachers themselves. We as a high school have had no baptism of grace to make us any less worshipful of academic traditions than the usual high-school faculty is. We have as large a proportion of would-be aristocrats of learning as they, as many believers in the survival of the fittest at the expense of all the taxpayers; as many who would wave aside the fact that we are hired men and women obligated to return, dollar for dollar, an output of trained personalities who are sent to us for benefit, not for discouragement. Norcross estimates in every high-school faculty 10 per cent of workers who are alive to study problems of the community and to adapt the school to the solution, 10 per cent who are grafters obstructing the growth of efficiency, and 80 per cent who are capable of efficient work if they are held to it. Every high school tells itself that it is better than it is. We have heard compliments for this one. This committee, however, was constituted because of a feeling that much advancement of service is possible in this school, chiefly in the way of keeping more girls in school, keeping them longer, and paying more attention to their progress day by day.

Your committee has discussed the question of fitting the food to the patient. We believe that the critical period is the first year. We have consulted superintendents, only to find that, instead of insisting that the course of study is responsible for so many withdrawals and so many failures, the superintendents say that there is a regrettable tendency among weak teachers to use the course of study as an excuse for failure. The course of study can be covered by every child who gets into the high school. Everyone has the mental power for it. It is our business to awaken this power and to direct it. There is nothing in the by-laws, in the directions of superintendents, or in anything else except a teacher's perverse assumption, that justifies pushing along through a course of study faster than any of the children can follow, or dawdling along so slowly that any of the children lose interest. The course of study is there; the pupil is there. If the teacher cannot make them fit, the teacher is to blame.

## V. TAKING MONEY FIXES RESPONSIBILITY

The present-day demand upon high schools is responsibility. How does that affect us? It resolves itself into finance. Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year are paid by the people to maintain this school. Three hundred thousand dollars of this money go to us personally. We are accustomed to regard ourselves as above business and incapable of measurement by dollars and cents, yet the past ten years have made it more clear that one of the best things that can happen to us is the realization that education is public business and that a dollar-and-cents measurement is inevitable. It is the duty of the principal to give to the city returns for this investment. Who are the chief agents? We are. As Dewey remarks, "We teachers are the only educators in the system." What the children get depends upon what we do. The ultimate responsibility rests upon us, not upon children nor upon parents; for no money whatever is paid to them. It is a waste of time therefore for a teacher to say, "I cannot educate this child; it is the child's fault." The proper answer is, "You are employed and paid to educate just the kind of children that are sent to you. Their successes are to your credit, their failures lie at your door." It is useless to say, "This is the worst class I ever had; this class is below grade," etc. A physician cannot berate patients because they are sick. It is nothing that we are doctors of philosophy. The question is, What can our children do after meeting us for a term? It is a principal's duty to insist that teachers attract children to the school and that teachers both make the studies fit the children and make the children fit the studies. It does not mean our knowing a subject, it means our awakening the sluggard. That is what sluggards are for. That is what we are for. If a man prepares himself as an advertisement-writer no one pays him on the basis of the college he attended, no one judges him by his methods, or by his effort; he is judged only by the number of customers secured by his advertisements. That is what we need: a system by which the teacher who attracts, retains, and educates children will be paid in accordance with her success. We suffer from lack of competition. Tenure of posi-

tion rewards the lazy and indifferent teacher equally with the successful. We should have a salary system by which increases depend upon the success shown by the testing of our work. Some high schools have it already. It is a merit system that promises better work for higher pay and corrects the awful error that a teacher's pay is for the position instead of for the work done. In the schools where this system of better pay for better work is in practice there is life and efficiency which were impossible under the old system of pay for length of service. It gives the teacher the stimulus which the lawyer, the physician, and the author have: that of a reputation to make and rewards to win.

So long as we see no connection between our pay and our success we must be moved by such motives as are available. We must expect our supervisors to keep us advised of the main purpose of the school: the attraction, retention, and education of all the children it will hold. We must bid good-bye to the dear old fallacies of by-gone days: that high-school mortality is inevitable and none of our concern; that only the bright and industrious and willing and superior are expected to remain; and that when we have assigned, explained, and heard a lesson, our responsibility ends. We high-school teachers are not very highly regarded in America. It is our own fault. We have not more than scratched the shell of the problem yet. Dr. Andrew S. Draper says we have wasted the lives of the children. Statistics show that for every child who is attracted even to enter a high school, eighty-four others never darken its doors. We have no cause to blow a trumpet yet. Rather in humility and contrition ought a high-school teacher to acknowledge repentance for past defenses of an untenable and un-American proposition, and to meet the future with a promise to set about the education of all children, rich and poor, fit and unfit.

#### VI. THE CASE REDUCED TO THEOREMS

To sum up, therefore, it appears that "retardation," "elimination," "mortality" are due to many causes, but dwelling on them will not help us much. The word has gone out from the superintendent's office that the disease is to be studied and cured. Instead of following a time-worn custom of educators and col-

lecting one thousand and one reasons why these things cannot be cured, let us banish as useless and disheartening all negative defenses and rise up to welcome the new order of high-school procedure as if we had asked for it.

These are our dicta :

1. Each one of us accepts something between three and a half dollars and fifteen dollars for every day we spend in company with our school children.

2. It is paid by all the parents and citizens.

3. It is paid for the advantage of each child of high-school age.

4. Each pupil should be given each day something that she can do.

5. She should do it.

6. If she does not, the system is by so much a failure.

7. I am responsible for each failure in my department.

8. The teacher of yesterday could say to the pupil, "If you fail it is your own fault."

9. I cannot say that.

10. It is my business to know and to use all the influences preventive of failure until I get the effective specific.

11. Positive, hopeful, encouraging suggestions, coupled with the well-known observation that hard work wins and is a pleasure, are excellent medicines.

12. Every study of successful teachers shows prominent use of these tonics.

13. They are the official remedies prescribed (*Eighth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools*, New York, p. 77).

14. I not only have to use them but I am obligated to secure success.

15. The critical period is the student's first year.

16. I must give the first-year children more successful treatment.

17. There are powers of success within me which brought me through high school and college.

18. If to these I add powers of inspiration, encouragement, and suggestion, my success as an educator is sure.